



"A startling insight into the aims, dreams and ideologies of a generation
of radicalized youth." – Paul Mason,
author of *Meltdown* and *Why It's Kicking Off Everywhere*

OCCUPY EVERYTHING

Reflections on why it's kicking off everywhere

EDITED BY ALESSIO LUNGI & SETH WHEELER

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank Stevphen Shukaitis, Emma Dowling, David Harvie, Ben Lear, Alex Andrews, Alice Nutter, Fergus Jenkins, Brian Layng, Katy Smith and Paul Mason for their unending help and patience in achieving this project.

This book is dedicated to Luca, Poppy, Katy and Frances.

Occupy Everything: Reflections on Why It's Kicking Off Everywhere
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ISBN 978-1-57027-251-6

Cover design by Alessio Lunghi
Cover photo © Yiannis Biliris www.greekriots.com
Interior design by briandesign

Released by Minor Compositions, Wivenhoe / New York / Port Watson
Minor Compositions is a series of interventions & provocations drawing from autonomous politics, avant-garde aesthetics, and the revolutions of everyday life.

Minor Compositions is an imprint of Autonomedia
www.minorcompositions.info | minorcompositions@gmail.com

Distributed by Autonomedia
PO Box 568 Williamsburgh Station
Brooklyn, NY 11211

www.autonomedia.org
info@autonomedia.org

If you don't let us dream,
we won't let you sleep?

Ben Lear & Raph Schlembach

Point nine of Paul Mason's "Twenty Reasons" highlights the personal experience of the crisis. For many, the future looks decidedly bleaker than it has done for a long time. For us this subjective experience of the failure of the capitalist promise of unending growth and luxury underpins much of the unrest occurring across the globe. Whilst this experience changes across space – indeed some parts of the world are experiencing strong, continued growth – we see important political commonalities emerging. What connects our struggles is the rage we feel as our social wealth and dignity is attacked. These connections are not, however, unproblematic. Whilst we are connected through our hope for a better future, our task will be to ensure our hope and energy is not side-tracked into struggling for more work and less prosperity.

I. PROMISE

"Marx was right. Marx was right all along!"

– *placard on national demonstration against education cuts*

What is the "capitalist promise" whose failure is leading to our struggles? We see the capitalist promise as the political and social forms of legitimisation which capitalist development relies upon. These forms are expressed differently across space and class, from the "American dream" to Ed Miliband's "British promise" "that the next generation would always do better than the last" and the dream of export based development. The promise of capital is that of unending growth, and the redistribution or

trickle down of that wealth. Tied into this promise of wealth are ideas of accessible education, social mobility, paid employment, secure jobs, freedom from debt and improvement upon previous generations. The underpinning of the capitalist promise is the belief in the ability of capital to provide social security and the means to a good life. This promise, our expectations of capital and thus the horizons of our potential futures, have been shaped by previous generations – through what was won, through what appeared possible in previous times. In Europe this is informed by the nostalgic, sepia-toned memory of the Fordist era, replete with promises of full employment, family wage and mass consumption. This isn't a case of false consciousness, of conspiracy or of capitalist "lies", but the outcome of the ways in which people invest the society they find themselves in with the hope for a better, more comfortable and enjoyable life.

This promise, as already mentioned, varies over time, across space and between different social groups. However, Paul Mason identifies the graduate without a future as a key international actor in recent struggles. Many students enroll at university in the hope of getting a better job at the end of it, a hope that is becoming increasingly unlikely as the crisis deepens and leaves large proportions of populations structurally unemployable. In North Africa and the Arab world, decades of developmental policies implemented by nationalist strongmen and autocratic monarchs have not delivered Western levels of wealth beyond a privileged elite. Those gains that have occurred are now under threat as oil and food prices rise and Western consumer spending falls. As well as being a struggle for democracy the "Arab Spring" is also a revolt against poverty, expressed in rising food prices and a lack of jobs.

What unites the experiences of student protests, labour movements and the Arab Spring, then, are their relationships to the capitalist promise. Our problem with capitalism isn't the system's "greed" or the over-consumption of seemingly "passive citizens", but the way in which wealth is produced and distributed which leads to empty homes, unused swimming pools and rusting unsold cars produced by under-paid workers living debt-financed lives. Imagining ways out of our current political and economic situation does not, and should not, entail a move towards austerity, be that enforced or voluntary. Our problem with capitalism is not that it produces an abundance of wealth but that it is incapable of fulfilling this promise for all but a privileged few.

II. BETRAYAL

Why did Nick Clegg cross the road?
Because he said he wouldn't.

– popular joke about Deputy Prime Minister

Economic crisis and enforced austerity, combined with environmental crises and rising oil and food prices appear to be challenging the capitalist promise. Here in the UK the government is using the crisis as the pretext for dramatic cuts to public spending complemented by moves towards marketisation of key public sectors; most controversially higher education and health. Economists predict that any recovery that may occur will be a jobless recovery; workplaces are being “rationalised” with many positions being permanently removed and/or being replaced with precarious, overworked temporary and contract roles. Much of the burden of this structural adjustment is being borne by young people (in April 2011, 1 in 5 of 16–25 year olds in Britain were reportedly unemployed) – trade unions are already talking of a lost generation.

Between us, the authors, having spent more than 11 years in higher education, we still have little hope of moving beyond underpaid, undervalued, under-stimulating contract work. As the university re-structures and permanent, secure work is replaced by more precarious, target-driven research we have seen our own aspirations and plans for the future dwindle away. We see many young people in a similar if not worse position than us. For those of us in the streets during the student demonstrations of the winter of 2010/11 this sense of betrayal was tangible. These were moments of convergence in which our individual feelings of betrayal found collective form. However, we believe the feeling of betrayal extends beyond those involved in the education system directly. The seeming common sense of “work hard, get a good job and live a happy life”, repeated in job centres and by “lifestyle management” gurus, no longer stands up to scrutiny. For the recently unemployed, or those facing longer hours for less pay, the dream of wealth and security has been betrayed. The sense of social betrayal, of the end of the capitalist promise of wealth in return for discipline and hard work has become generalised.

Perhaps one of the best examples of how this betrayal has been expressed here in the UK is the curious rise and fall of Clegg-O-Mania. In the run up to the general election in May 2010 Nick Clegg was seen by many as a breath of fresh air and an alternative to stale party politics. After

the elections Clegg became a focus of the Take Back Parliament campaign, the UK's purple movement, which sought electoral reform and had famous musician Billy Bragg as one of their strongest advocates. At one demonstration, to cheers from the crowd, Clegg explained "I've campaigned for a better, more open, more transparent, new politics, every single day of this general election campaign. I genuinely believe it is in the national interest". At this moment the Liberal Democrats were truly seen as an alternative to the self-interested, untrustworthy politics of the other two parties, an example that parliamentary politics could work.

However, by the time of the student protests and the Liberal Democrats having backtracked on their pledge to protect higher education, alongside the first wave of cuts, the situation had changed. Whilst the placards and banners still had Nick Clegg's face on them the message now read "Nick Clegg we know you, you're a fucking Tory too". Many had seen the Liberal Democrats as allies in the struggle against rising tuition fees and a buffer from the cuts and were furious at their subsequent lack of fidelity. In terms of the student struggles the Liberal Democrat betrayal convinced many people that political parties could not be trusted to defend social rights. The promise of a break with traditional party politics was betrayed brutally and "Clegging" entered the vocabulary of many, with the youth slang website urbandictionary describing it as "The process of having sold out, especially to a system or body that directly undermines the principles and values you have long adhered to". The rise and fall of Nick Clegg echoes the larger, more structural, slipping away of the capitalist promise of wealth.

The broken promise of unending growth and progress is now a reality. Although we are not "all in this together" it is a reality that cuts across many social positions, from the unemployed youth in North Africa to European students graduating with tens of thousands of pounds of debt and little hope of a job to pay it off. The crisis is being felt subjectively as a betrayal of the promise of development and growth.

III. DESPAIR

"Fuck this, I'm moving to Scotland"

– placard at student protest on Parliament Square

Nick Clegg's betrayal indicates that this is not just an economic crisis. This is also a crisis of democracy and representation. We have all experienced

sentiments of despair and impotence, unable to think how we could find our voices heard. Herbert Marcuse, the great theorist of a previous generation of student protesters, wrote that the “containment of social change is perhaps the most singular achievement of advanced industrial society” (*One Dimensional Man*). We can, at times, still appreciate this feeling of one-dimensionality.

When hundreds of thousands marched “for the alternative” in London, what was this alternative that we were putting forward? Listening to those slowly making their way along Embankment, meandering into Hyde Park, we often heard arguments that begun with “of course, some cuts are necessary, but...” Current debate seems to question the speed and scale of austerity measures, not their inevitability. The TUC organisers themselves saw the day as an expression of opposition to the “fast, deep public services cuts”, a demand for a more just way of administering public debt and dealing with recession, through job creation and “sustainable growth”. We are trapped in a logic in which the only apparent response to crisis is the equal distribution of the burden and more work in the hope of stimulating new growth.

Outside of the political parties and segments of the institutional left we are witnessing the rise of populist politics. Unions, NGOs and social movements such as UK Uncut are calling for the implementation of redistributive policies such as increased financial regulation and higher taxation of the super rich (such as the Tobin Tax). Whilst these movements are useful in highlighting the structural inequality of capitalism, and providing a pole of attraction for angry people, we feel they fall short politically. The crisis of capital won't be stopped by recovering taxes lost to legal loopholes nor to tightening regulation.

This seeming unwillingness to imagine bigger political alternatives is contributing to the sense of despair and rage that many of us feel. The future has been made one-dimensional; all that remains is more of the same, for less reward. As long as our alternatives focus on the negotiation of wealth distribution, it is no more than a rearranging of the social condition of the present.

Our hypothesis is clear; society is capable of containing, or recuperating, our criticism and our rage. But also, and the point of Paul Mason's twenty theses is to show exactly this, there is reason to think that new possibilities are opening up that allow our criticisms to resonate further

than they have before, possibly to the extent that they may rupture this one-dimensionality. These possibilities exist both within and beyond the post-political condition of the present.

The political task that we have before us is to move beyond this despair, in both its personal and collective dimensions, and re-negotiate the basis of our hope, not in capitalist development, but in its confrontation and eventual abolishment. The exciting possibilities and potentials we see within existing moments of resistance serve as inspiration and encouragement that this impossibility is a potential future yet to come.

IV. HOPE

"I thought we were going to Alton Towers"

– *placard on national demonstration against education cuts*

Where is the element of hope that spurs thousands into action, world-wide and across social strata?

We've been presented with a narrative of hope turned into despair; the capitalist promise of growth unfolding into a nightmare of cuts and austerity. And yet, within the one-dimensionality of capitalist existence lies hope. Hope not because of a transcendental possibility of salvation, not because of an ontological revolutionary outside, but because of a movement that grows out of the very condition of despair. Hope is not utopian, in the etymological sense of a non-place, but it is dialectical; it is already here. Capitalist accumulation entails within it the very possibility of its collapse. So we need to invert the hope-despair narrative and trace how, through our subjective experiences of crisis and despair, we emerge with new collective hopes and desires.

Our hope is also non-utopian in the sense that we are not in the business of painting detailed pictures of what a post-capitalist society will look like. That does not mean that we cannot imagine or experiment with social relationships that are not dominated by the logic of accumulation and valorisation. But it does mean that we are not concerned with the details of who will clear the rubbish off our streets in a post-capitalist society – an obsession that appears perverse in a world where millions survive only on rubbish. What we do say when we talk about an alternative is that we reject the logic of capital. The vision of a post-capitalist world is not one of paradise; we cannot imagine a world without problems and conflicts.

But we can, and must, imagine a future where the production of wealth is no longer tied to class divisions and the labour relation. Generalising this re-understanding of hope and progress as against and beyond capital is the key political task that we face.

Hope means more to us than just a defence of the present state of affairs from an onslaught of cuts and economic readjustment. We need to think about our desires not as individual aspirations to protect our lives from change, but consider seriously the possibility of controlling our collective future. Take last winter's student protests in the UK as an example. Do we really want to defend the university system as it stood before the Browne Review? We would suggest that the students demanded more than that: an education that was not tied to the market, an end to the elitism of the sector, a life of learning that was not instrumental for success on the labour market. And it was those demands that related their protests to the hopes and desires of the anarchists in Greece, the youth movements in Egypt, or the unionists in Wisconsin.

Our hope, in this sense, cannot be equated to a bourgeois pursuit of individual happiness. The possibility of a better life for all lies not simply in the demand for a more equal distribution of capitalist commodities. It lies in the recognition that capital simply cannot fulfil its promise. Ultimately, we can't be afraid to make "luxury for all" the central demand of our movement. In order to make this desire a reality, we need to recognise that "we are the alternative"; that wealth creation can be organised as a collective endeavour in which we shape our own history, where we are not the co-managers of capital, but the social movement that aims to abolish the conditions of its own enslavement.